

Transportation

The Problem

A safe and efficient transportation infrastructure is critical to a prosperous society. Well-planned corridors pave the way to successfully ensure movement of goods to market and people to their homes and jobs in a reasonable amount of time. However, congestion and gridlock continue to threaten Washington's economic health and a commuter's quality of life. Highway construction costs continue to climb as construction materials head overseas, labor costs increase, and environmental regulations grow more burdensome.

Washington's freight system is made up of an interconnected group of government entities and transportation corridors. Goods from abroad make their way through Washington's gateways to local and national markets, while local farmers and manufacturers ship their products across the state to local, national and international markets. Transportation plays a pivotal role in getting these products to market. Traffic flow and safety, among other issues, play key roles in ensuring that products reach their destination intact and on time. These issues especially affect Eastern Washington agricultural products. For example, some growers make two daily roundtrips to the Western Washington ports, and traffic congestion can cause the second trip to miss the waiting ship – with the grower paying for the missed shipment.

The Solution

Senate Republicans believe that transportation planning must focus on improving safety, relieving congestion and getting goods to market. SRC has therefore fought to improve the safety and efficiency of Washington's corridors by demanding greater accountability from transportation agencies and requiring that projects that are started, get finished.

Senate Republicans have also worked to identify and fund key highway improvement and preservation projects throughout the state, including safety-related projects like repairing aging bridges and fixing accident-prone corridors.

Background

- Current funding for transportation projects comes from the gas tax, license tab fees, and other assorted licensing fees.
- Prior to the 2003 and 2005 gas tax increases, 17 percent (or 4 cents of the previously existing 23-cent state gas tax) was available for highway preservation, safety improvements, and congestion relief projects.
- It is currently estimated that for every penny of tax, the state collects \$34 million in revenue.
- In 1998, the Legislature crafted Referendum 49 and bonded the state's motor vehicle excise tax (MVET) to fund billions of dollars for congestion-relief projects. Then-Gov. Locke also created the Blue Ribbon Commission on Transportation to study the state's transportation needs.
- Initiative 695, passed in 1999, eliminated the MVET and reduced license tabs to \$30. Courts struck down the successful initiative because it violated the constitutional "single subject rule." In response to voter approval for I-695, the Legislature implemented its \$30 provision that following year.

- Referendum 51, crafted in 2002, would have raised the gas tax by 9 cents. Voters defeated that proposal.
- In 2003, the Legislature passed a 5-cent gas tax that, when bonded, funded 160 specific transportation projects statewide.
- In 2005, the Legislature passed a 9.5-cent gas tax to be implemented in four stages: 3 cents in 2005, 3 cents in 2006, 2 cents in 2007, and 1.5 cents in 2008. The gas tax, if bonded, would pay for 274 projects statewide to be constructed over 16 years. A total of one cent will go to cities and counties for local road improvements. Implementation of these projects was put on hold until the fate of the new gas tax was determined by voters on November 8.

Issues Raised by I-912 Debate

- ◊ Road projects should be set in statute.
- ◊ Gas tax increase is permanent, it never goes away.
- ◊ Prioritization of projects should be 1) safety; 2) congestion relief; and 3) freight mobility.
- ◊ Emergency clause was unnecessary, tax increases should be subject to referendum.
- ◊ Passenger vehicle weight fees should be used for roads, not transit.

Election Night - November 8, 2005: I-912 failed statewide, but it passed in all but two Eastern Washington counties (Walla Walla and Whitman). It was defeated in all Puget Sound area counties -- most heavily in King County (66.8 percent "no") where 40 percent of the state's voters live. Clark was the only Southwest Washington county to defeat the measure (51.1 percent "no"). The initiative was narrowly approved in Whatcom County (50.02 percent "yes").

SRC Wins – 2005

- Transportation performance audits to be conducted by the state auditor. (ESSB 6103)
- Making the Secretary of DOT more accountable to the voters by having him/her appointed by the governor rather than the Transportation Commission. (ESB 5513)
- Eastern Washington Freight Corridor Study from Osoyoos, Canada to Mesa, Franklin County funded in 2005-07 transportation budget (vetoed).

SRC Goals

- Eliminate sales tax on materials for state-funded highway construction projects.
- Save money by streamlining the local permit process.
- Reallocate Seattle Monorail MVET to fund Alaskan Way Viaduct repairs.